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RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001632

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DEPT FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR SMOFFATT
DEPT OF TREASURY FOR BRIAN MCCAULEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/23/2019

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [KFIN](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: AQAP LIFTS \$500K IN ADEN HEIST?

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: An armed robbery rocked Aden on August 17, in part due to the large amount stolen (100 million Yemeni riyals) and in part due to the belief of government and non-government sources that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operatives are the culprits. The tactics utilized in the armed robbery bear a striking resemblance to AQAP methods used in previous attacks, and the sophistication of the attack discredits claims that ordinary robbers or bank officials acted alone. Given the ROYG's lack of follow-through investigating a similar 1998 armed robbery attributed to an Islamic extremist group and the potential for these monies to be used to fund terrorist activities, this bold, unusual operation, if truly attributable to AQAP, would provide the organization with a substantial financial infusion at a time when it is thought to be short of cash.
END SUMMARY.

HIGHLY COORDINATED ATTACK POINTS TO AQAP

¶2. (C) Armed gunmen robbed an Arab Limited Bank truck carrying 100 million riyals (equivalent to \$500,000) in Aden on August 17 in a highly coordinated attack that many suspect was the work of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operatives. The armed robbers were disguised as Yemeni policemen and conducted the robbery in a busy, downtown district in broad daylight, signaling a high level of operational sophistication uncommon among average Yemeni criminals. After hijacking the bank vehicle and transferring the money to a get-away car, they erased the serial number of a third car they used in the operation, which they abandoned outside Aden in order to delay authorities in tracing its ownership, according to press reports.

¶3. (C) According to independent and official sources, the precision of the attack and the tactics utilized during the armed robbery make it unlikely to be the work of ordinary criminals. Official government newspaper 26 September noted that a group of Islamic extremists are suspected to be behind the plot, though no confirmation of their affiliation or motives was published. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told PolOff on August 18, "Al-Qaeda is responsible and I reiterate that the robbed money may be used for terrorist operations," underscoring the similarity to previous armed robberies by terrorist groups in the region. The attackers' use of police uniforms is reminiscent of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) tactics utilized during the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a on September 17, 2008.

¶4. (C) Rather than attack the bank itself, the robbers conducted the heist in broad daylight in a busy sector of Aden, suggesting a high degree of operational sophistication and access to bank routes and times. XXXXXXXXXXXXX said, "There is no doubt that there were people who provided them with information about the amount of money and schedule of the movement." Several bank officials have been arrested by ROYG security forces for possible complicity in the robbery, according to press reports. Lieutenant Colonel Haider Haider of the Political Security Organization in Aden told EmbOff, "Preliminary reports indicate that there was an insider involved in this case." Though no official word has been issued by the ROYG, Ministry of Defense-owned weekly 26 September noted on August 20 that security forces in Aden had arrested a group of Islamic extremists they believe were involved in the robbery. On August 22 the Yemen Observer, an English-language weekly owned by the President's secretary, quoted an anonymous security official claiming that the Islamic extremists were affiliated with Tariq al-Fadhl, former pro-Saleh jihadi turned Southern Movement leader. Interestingly, Free Aden, an anti-ROYG, openly secessionist web publication, also identified AQAP as the likely perpetrator but claimed the ROYG was attempting to frame the Southern Movement by highlighting the fact that the empty bank vehicle was found in a district of Aden populated by Southern Movement activists.

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¶5. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXXX highlighted the similarity between the recent attack and a 1998 armed robbery of a car carrying nine million Yemeni riyals of government salaries. The 1998 robbery was conducted by eight men dressed in military uniforms at a checkpoint where they ordered the vehicle to pull over, requested paperwork, and then shot two of the

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passengers before hijacking the car with the stolen salaries.
After the 1998 incident, the ROYG simply compensated the

government employees whose salaries were stolen without investigating the robbery, according to XXXXXXXXXXXX. Though independent reporters tried to garner updated information from the ROYG on the whereabouts of the stolen money and the perpetrators, a follow-up was never published by independent or government press. A few weeks after the 1998 robbery, 16 western tourists were kidnapped in Abyan by the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, an Islamic extremist group believed to have cooperated with al-Qaeda in the 2000 USS Cole bombing in Aden. (Note. The group was led by the late Abu al-Hassan al-Mihdar, who later confessed to the kidnapping and was summarily executed after a Yemeni court sentenced him and two of his men to death. End Note.) XXXXXXXXXXXX told PolOff that at the time, the robbery was widely believed by Adenis to have been carried out to fund the kidnapping operation, and he believes the same motives could be behind this recent robbery.

COMMENT

16. (C) It is unlikely that ordinary robbers were behind the August 17 attack, considering the precision of the attack and the sophisticated tactics used. The fact that the attackers conducted a coordinated attack requiring information on the specific routes and times of the bank vehicle suggests that they enjoyed good connections and access to sensitive information, both historical hallmarks of Islamic extremists in Yemen. The ROYG's lack of transparency regarding the 1998 armed robbery and its apparent failure to thoroughly investigate the whereabouts of the stolen monies does not inspire confidence that the perpetrators of this attack will be apprehended. If, in fact, they are affiliated with AQAP, \$500,000 represents a significant influx of cash which could be used to fund future attacks. END COMMENT.

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